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Congressional Web Sites Get Top Honors

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WASHINGTON (AP) — When congressional Web sites are good, they're really good. But most aren't, says a nonprofit group that rated more than 600 of them.

The study, by the Congressional Management Foundation, found that people want information and they want it fast — without the flashy graphics and fawning tributes to the boss that are standard fare on most lawmakers' Internet sites.

Researchers at the foundation, which provides management services to House and Senate offices, and George Washington University rated 605 congressional Web sites, including those for all 535 members and for congressional committees and leadership offices.

Congress, as whole, earned a C-minus.

Fifteen sites received a ``Gold Mouse Award," the foundation's top honor.

Overall, Senate Web sites did better than House sites — senators have bigger budgets and spend more time in Congress, after all.

Republicans did better in the House and Democrats outperformed in the Senate, mirroring the party majorities in each chamber.

The Republican Conference and Democratic Caucus sites in the House got high marks as well.

The researchers, whose work was funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, last reviewed congressional Web sites three years ago. Rick Shapiro, the foundation's executive director, said there's been progress, but not enough.

``The blueprint is there," he said. ``The bad news is, most of the rest of the Congress hasn't figured out that some of their colleagues have developed that blueprint.

``They're really missing the boat."

Rep. Mike Pence, R-Ind., earned a Gold Mouse for his site, to which he provides daily audio clips. His appearances on the House floor are videotaped and posted within an hour.

Pence, who has a radio-TV background, said one of his ambitions when he arrived in Congress was to advise fellow Republicans about communications.

``I expressed to my team very early on that I wanted to set the pace in Internet technologies and accessibility and availability of information," he said.

Video clips and other novelties aren't really necessary, Shapiro said, but knowing your audience is key.

``People aren't spending time doing research on the Web to look for fun graphics to play



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with," he said. ``They're coming because they have needs and they want specific information."

Some sites convey that information through targeted newsletters; for example, people interested in the environment get an e-mail every time their legislator speaks on the subject. Citizens also like background information about how Congress works and updates on the issues.

California Democratic Rep. Mike Honda's site — another Gold Mouse winner — offers 14 issue-oriented newsletters and was rated ``crisp, inviting and very usable" by researchers. Honda's district includes Silicon Valley, so the Internet comes naturally.

``So many of our folks in the Valley communicate that way," Honda said.

Soon, he said, other lawmakers may feel pressure to make their Internet sites a priority.

``They need to have that pressure from their constituents, saying, 'We can't communicate with you efficiently,'" Honda said. ``They'll catch up, they'll get it. Nobody likes to get low grades."

Some congressional Web sites lose points for datedness. While the best sites post news releases and developments almost immediately, others don't even reflect the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Outside consultants make some sites more user-friendly, but most are still updated on the cheap. Too many times, Shapiro said, the job is left to the ``techie in the office," who uses the site as a personal playground while providing little helpful information.

On the Net:

Congressional Management Foundation: <http://www.cmfweb.org>

Pew Charitable Trusts: <http://www.pewtrusts.com>

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